

Nature *Magazine*

DECEMBER
1956

VOLUME 49
NUMBER 10

60 Cents



Cave of the Sea Lions

By WELDON F. HEALD



The north coast of Santa Cruz Island is honeycombed with caverns cut and sculptured by the gnawing waves. Largest is the Cueva Pintada, the Cave of the Sea Lions.

THE *Seyelyn* cruised eastward at half speed along the north shore of Santa Cruz Island. Everything was gray. Grim gray cliffs rose sheer from a choppy, slate-gray sea and disappeared into an opaque curtain of gray fog above. Even the restless foam that fringed the cliffs and flecked the waves was gray. So, too, were the wheeling gulls and occasional flying fishes that skimmed the surface of the water. The only bright thing was the 104-foot, diesel-powered yacht. But the *Seyelyn* in her trim whiteness seemed a frivolous intruder in a desolate gray world.

With the moist salt wind in our faces, we leaned against the starboard rail and peered ahead at the murky line of cliffs. We were looking for the *Cueva Pintada* of the Spaniards—the Painted Cave—reputed to be one of the world's largest marine grottoes and the home of hundreds of sea lions.

Santa Cruz, largest of southern California's Channel Islands, lies off the coast about twenty miles south of Santa Barbara. Twenty-two miles long and averaging five miles wide, it is rugged and mountainous, and the

rocky shores are noted for their sea caves. In fact, the entire north coast along the water line is honeycombed with caverns cut and sculptured by the gnawing waves. Some are mere slits and blowholes, others so low they cannot be entered, and a few have underwater entrances. But by far the most remarkable is the *Cueva Pintada*.

Undoubtedly seen by the distinguished navigator, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, who sailed these waters in 1542, this amazing cave is still little known and seldom visited. The reason is that Santa Cruz is privately owned and for three-quarters of a century strangers have not been particularly welcome. We had been lucky however, in wangling an invitation of sorts. That is, we had gotten permission to explore the coast, but were not encouraged to penetrate inland at any point. So we had spent several days cruising around the island, poking into bays and hidden coves.

The *Seyelyn* continued to cut slowly through the gray water. Suddenly the Skipper shouted from the pilot house.

"There she is!"

Then we saw through the dimness a great black gash in the cliffs ahead. It seemed to split them from top to bottom, as if a giant had swung a sword in a fit of rage. Our pulses quickened a little. We knew that this somber portal led into the dark heart of the earth where there were secrets perhaps no man should know. The gaping black hole in the surrounding grayness looked forbidding, inhospitable and treacherous.

In a few minutes the *Seyelyn* came to rest in the little harbor beside Point Diablo. The anchor chain rattled down and we swung to, with the high arched entrance of the cave before us. All hands immediately got busy. The dory was lowered to the water from the top deck, and made ready. Four, however, agreed with the engineer that the delights of albacore fishing exceeded those of pushing into dank, dark holes, and they re-

eighty feet high. We saw, too, why Painted Cave is a fitting name. The limestone walls and ceiling have been dyed by the salts through the centuries into fantastic patterns of brilliant yellows, soft browns, reds, greens and vivid white.

At the far end of the chamber an ominous looking corridor led into black obscurity. We entered and followed it through increasing darkness until we came to an opening not much bigger than the boat. In fact, each successive wave, swelling and hissing up the narrowing corridor, almost closed the hole. As we approached, an unearthly cacaphony of muffled distant barks, honks and yelps came from the depths of the cave beyond. Then, suddenly we were startled to see two gleaming, silvery apparitions emerge from the hole, one after the other, and swiftly sweep by under water, leaving a



U. S. DEPT. OF INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH

Santa Cruz Island is rugged and mountainous, twenty-two miles long and rising to heights of 2500 feet.

mained on board. So the six of us who felt the explorer's urge shoved off in the dory, with the Mate at the oars.

The approach from the water was extremely impressive. The cave entrance rose to a pointed Gothic arch, sixty to seventy feet high, flanked by two massive buttresses. These slanted down the cliffs and formed at the waterline a semi-circular marine forecourt. As we rowed into it the waves lazily sucked and gurgled among the rocks, kelp fronds slowly swayed beneath us, and wisps of fog streamed down the cliffs, alternately hiding, then revealing the huge yawning orifice ahead. A clammy gray gloom enveloped everything.

It was an eerie place, uncanny and sinister, and the sense that it was not real increased as we passed through the great portal and entered the cave. Here the light dimmed to a ghostly gray dusk, and imprisoned sounds echoed hollowly as if trying to escape to the open air. When our eyes became accustomed to the deep twilight, we found we were in a vast vaulted chamber, perhaps

shimmering trail of phosphorescence behind them. These were sea lions coming out of the den we were about to enter.

Getting the boat as near the entrance as we could, we waited for the next wave. When it swished by and filled the hole, we pushed in immediately afterward, during the following subsidence. Ducking low, we just squeezed through before the next wave came along. At once we were in a completely black void, filled with an appalling confusion of weird reverberating sounds. The barking of the sea lions had stopped, but the wave ahead of us grunted, sobbed, and groaned as it surged into interstices and devious unfathomed caverns far back in the mountain. We could also sense the movement of living beings somewhere near, and were aware of a sibilant murmuring of sighs, wheezes and snorts.

The skipper lighted a flare and threw it on the water. Immediately another great chamber appeared around us, its dimensions so large that the ceiling and far recesses

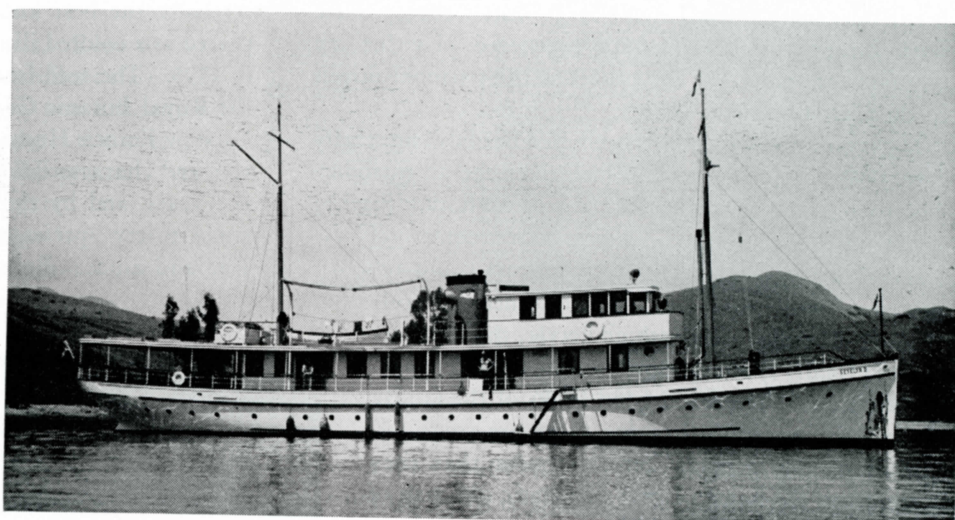
were hidden in vague shadows. But in the obscure darkness at the north end was a sight to make the heart skip a beat. There shone myriad glowing points of light, resembling the dying coals of a giant conflagration. As we rowed slowly and quietly in that direction we saw that these were hundreds of eyes watching us. A wide ledge sloping down to the water was completely covered with black, squirming masses of sea lions, alerted by our invasion of their den. As we neared the formidable array of aroused animals we assured each other that sea lions were usually gentle and good natured. We put out of mind those bloody battles of the males during breeding season, when the piercing screams of the warriors drift out over the ocean as eyes are ripped out, flesh gashed, and lips torn to shreds.

For the male sea lion is polygamous, and here the animals were huddled on the ledge in close-packed family groups. In the center of each was the huge male, eyes blazing, mouth open in a rasping snarl, and head waving from side to side. Around them were their harems of

and their spirit of play is strongly developed. Pups, particularly, like to frolic and gambol, shaking seaweed, tossing pebbles, and sliding down wet rocks. In captivity, adults show a remarkable aptitude for learning tricks, and it is usually sea lions that are billed in zoos, circuses and on the stage, as "trained seals." But perhaps the strangest thing in the life history of these aquatic experts is that the pups are at first terrified of the water and have to be taught to swim.

On we came, closer and closer, wondering what the animals would do. Finally, a female near the edge dropped off into the water with a splash, followed by her pup, and both glided rapidly under us like black phantoms. Soon another dived off the ledge and passed beneath us, bound for the entrance, then another, and another. At first they came one by one, but as the exodus gained momentum, whole groups disintegrated and the ledge became alive with oncoming sea lions, rotating hind flippers in their peculiar galloping gait. The water was churned to phosphorescent foam by the scores of

Several days were spent taking the *Seyelyn* around Santa Cruz Island, poking into bays and hidden coves.



from five to a dozen females, each one sheltering her single pup, born earlier in the summer. Adult male sea lions measure eight to ten feet long, from nose to tip of short, stubby tail, and weigh up to a thousand pounds. But the females are much smaller, seldom reaching more than six feet. However, in the dim, spectral light of their den, deep in the earth, they looked like prodigious monsters of another world.

California sea lions are members of the seal family, as agile in the water as are their cousins, the fur seals, and much more so on land. Sea lions differ from seals, however, in having external ears, much longer necks, clawless front flippers without hair, and a coat of short, coarse, brown fur, worthless commercially, which turns a sleek, shiny black when wet. To maintain their active double life on land and sea they eat about forty pounds of marine animals a day, including some fishes, but mostly squids, octopuses and smaller floating organisms. They also swallow quantities of pebbles and mollusk shells, which remain in the stomach, apparently as aids to digestion. Sea lions are quick and intelligent

diving animals, and our boat danced, teetered and bobbed about like a cork. Any one of the big males could have upset us if he had charged, and even the waves might do so. But all we could do was to cling to the gunwhales to keep from being thrown out and distribute our weight to keep on as even a keel as possible. The din was appalling and increased to a deafening crescendo. Roars and bellows from the fleeing animals formed a diabolical counterpoint to the continuous splashing of their diving bodies—all magnified to thunderous proportions in the echoing confines of the great underground chamber.

Eventually the ledge cleared and only a few defiant males were left. Above them all on the highest point was an enormous battle-scarred veteran. With his huge bull neck in the air, he was a magnificent sight as he hurled his vocal challenges down upon us. One by one the others retreated and disappeared into the water, until only the gigantic sea lion was left, standing his ground majestic in his isolation. We felt that here was a true king, a member of Nature's nobility who would die rather than surrender the an- (continued on page 550)

and his pocket book. Generally speaking, the price is a good criterion of value; the better and more versatile equipment is, the more expensive it tends to be. On the other hand, a few dollars spent on a simple, inexpensive camera will sometimes open vistas previously undreamed of to the photographic beginner.

At the risk of seeming ultra conservative, I would advise the non-photographically informed purchaser to stick with well known names and standard brands—Eastman Kodak, Ansco, Bell and Howell, Kalart, Argus, Nomad—to name a few. Let the advanced amateurs and the super-enthusiasts haggle over the merits of various foreign-made products. The manufacturers in this country do a good enough job for most of us.

Avoid "gimmicks" and novelties if you want to give or receive a useful photographic gift. For example, last summer when I was in New York I noticed that all the novelty shops along Broadway and up 42nd Street were featuring smaller-than-postage-stamp-sized cameras that looked as though they came straight from a cloak and dagger espionage thriller. The shiny little devices ranged in price from a dollar up to two and two-fifty, depending on whether the carrying case was included and how many rolls of the special film were thrown in. I was fascinated until I actually entered a store and examined the cameras at close range. They were not worth the price asked, no matter how small and inexpensive they were. The same is unfortunately true of many so-called gift items and novelties. There are good stamp-sized cameras, but their cost places them not in the toy but in the luxury class.

For the darkroom

A good practical gift for the color photographer who does his own darkroom work is the 16-ounce Kodacolor Film Processing Kit (Process C-22). While it is of value to any photographer, amateur, commercial, or industrial, the new kit is designed particularly for "do-it-yourself" work in the home darkroom. By the simple addition of water to the packages of chemicals, these solutions can be prepared: Two 16-ounce batches of developer, two 16-ounce batches of stop bath, one 16-ounce batch of hardener, one 16-ounce batch of bleach, and one 16-ounce batch of fixer. Approximately sixteen rolls of 828 Kodacolor film, or

ten rolls of 127 film, or six rolls of 620/120 film, or four rolls of 616/116 film can be processed by the kit. Instruction sheets are included and the selling price of the kit is \$3.85.

For color photographers who take their viewing seriously, there is now available a group of new transparency viewing masks for use with the 10 x 10 Kodak Transparency Illuminator. The devices mask out stray light areas and provide a convenient rack for viewing the transparencies. Made of durable plastic, the masks are available in five different models to accommodate twenty 2 x 2 transparencies, nine 2¼ x 2¼, two 4 x 5, one 5 x 7, or one 8 x 10 transparency.

In conclusion—whether you hope to find a Brownie or a Leica, a filter or a telephoto lens, a pair of darkroom tongs or an enlarger under your tree this Christmas—may your Yuletide season be a happy one. ♡

Sea Lions

(Continued from page 519)

cestral home of his kind.

"He wins, boys," said the skipper with admiration. "Let's go."

So we turned and made for the entrance. Just before we squeezed through between waves, we looked back. The giant sea lion had not budged an inch, and as we slid through the hole the great room behind us burst into reverberating sound. It was the King telling the sea lion world of his victory, in a grand triumphal anthem.

An hour later, when the *Seyelyn* pulled up anchor and rounded Point Diablo, we seemed to be transported back to the familiar surroundings we knew. Gone was the black gash in the cliffs; gone, too, the somber grayness. The sun came out to blue the sea, the waves sparkled around us, and overhead the fog broke into tenuous white filaments against a clear bright sky. But we could not immediately adjust ourselves to normal things. For some time we found ourselves mentally going back into that deep, dark cavern for another audience with the mighty King and his subjects.

Since then I have never met anyone who has visited Painted Cave, and only two or three who have heard of it. But if I ever run across anyone who plans to go, he can count on me as a companion—definitely. For I have a hankering to know if His Majesty still lives and rules in the Cave of the Sea Lions. ♡

Are You A Nature Detective?

(Answers pages 529-533)

1. A glance up the tree, its top broken by a hurricane, reveals a flicker engaged in house-digging activities.
2. The pileated woodpecker has been at work.
3. The ocean winds have been shearing the trees.
4. The tracks, almost in a straight line, indicate a ground bird that was walking, not hopping. It was a pheasant.
5. It proves it was a pheasant for we see the tail marks pressed in the snow.
6. A crow has been this way, dragging its hind toe in the deep snow as it took each step, and left its wing prints as it suddenly took off. And a rabbit left signs of one of its hops in the foreground, hopping fast for its back feet landed in front of the prints made by the forefeet.
7. No, the wind has passed that way.
8. A mouse with a long tail has left a record of its travels.
9. The sap drops show that the tree was sawed recently. The rings show that the oak grew rapidly for the first 35 years of its about 160 years. Also the wood during the last 50 years is much lighter than the older heartwood.
10. It might have been bent by Indians as a trail marker, or by earlier settlers as a line marker. Or there may have been a falling tree to deform it. "As the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined."
11. Yes, to both clues.
12. An insect ate it, perhaps when the flower was still rolled in bud as we fold paper and snip out a snowflake or star design.
13. The layers of shale indicate that the land here was once under water.
14. From the rings you can deduce that the twig is two years old.
15. Yes, a litterbug has been this way.
16. A ruffed grouse left its droppings.
17. A gall insect has built its home on the pussy-willow, and when the knife cut open the swelling it exposed the larva of the gall-fly.
18. Many scuff marks of juncos and white-throated sparrows showed where they had been foraging for seed.